

## **JUNE 30, 1892**

## **HOMESTEAD STRIKE**

The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AA) was a labor union of skilled iron and steel workers that organized the Homestead Pittsburgh Bessemer Steel Works in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1881. The plant was purchased by industrialist Andrew Carnegie, and became part of United States Steel. Carnegie's steel mills produced armor for battleships during the Civil War, rails for railroads during Reconstruction, and beams, girders, and steel plates for bridges and skyscrapers during the start of the Industrial Era. Carnegie installed new technology to make work faster and reduce the need to pay for skilled labor. This upset the union representing skilled iron workers.

During the 1880s, the union went on a number of strikes to keep managers from forcing workers out of the union and to keep their collective bargaining rights. The plant would hire strikebreakers to end the disturbance but the AA managed to get the townspeople, especially the local immigrant groups, on their side. On one occasion, 2,000 townspeople joined the strikers to drive off a trainload of strikebreakers. During a later strike, 125 strikebreakers were met by 5,000 townspeople. With the support of the town, the AA essentially ran the Homestead plant, even though it was owned by Carnegie.

When Andrew Carnegie placed Henry Clay Frick in charge of Carnegie Steel Company, Frick made up his mind to break the union at Homestead. Carnegie was publicly in favor of labor unions. He condemned the use of strikebreakers and told associates that no steel mill was worth a single drop of blood, but secretly Carnegie agreed with Frick's desire to break the union. Seeing a strike in the future, Carnegie ordered the Homestead plant to manufacture large amounts of inventory so the plant could outlast a strike.

In 1892, the union agreement was going to expire and Frick was determined to resist the union's demands. He knew that the AA represented only about 800 of the 3,800 workers at the plant because the union only admitted skilled workers. He proposed to cut workers' wages since most of the workers were unskilled. At the time, unskilled mill workers, who were mainly eastern European immigrants, made less than \$1.70 for a 12-hour day. Skilled workers earned between \$4 and \$7.60 a day. Frick also wanted to eliminate the union from the plant and he was unwilling to compromise.

On June 29, 1892 when no agreement had been reached, Frick locked the union out of the plant and installed a high fence topped with barbed wire all the way around the mill. High towers were constructed near each mill building with searchlights and armed men, while high-pressure water cannons (some capable of spraying boiling-hot liquid) were placed at each entrance. The union declared a strike and committed themselves to keeping the plant closed. Picket lines circled the plant and 24-hour shifts established in the town. Three hundred guards were hired from the Pinkerton Detective Agency to provide security for the plant so Frick could reopen the plant with non-union workers. These thugs were called "Pinks".

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collective bargaining – negotiation between company management and a union representing a group of workers about wages, benefits, and working conditions  
strikebreaker – people hired to bully workers into ending a strike  
condemn – express complete public disapproval  
picket lines – a boundary established by workers on strike that others are asked not to cross

The union members were prepared for the Pinkertons' arrival. On July 5, 1892 the Pinks were seen traveling up the Monongahala River on barges, platforms pulled by tugboats used to transport goods. Union members sounded the alarm, bringing thousands of angry men, women, and children to the plant. They tore down the barbed-wire fence and strikers and assembled onto the Homestead plant grounds. When the barges docked at the company warf, shooting broke out. No one knows which side shot first, but for 14 hours gunfire was exchanged. Strikers tossed dynamite to sink the boats and pumped oil into the river to try to set it on fire. They even took control of one of the cannons at the town hall to fire on the barges, but the old weapon blew up, killing a striker. By the time the Pinkertons surrendered in the afternoon, three Pinks and nine workers were dead or dying. The workers declared victory in the bloody battle.

The union's victory was short-lived. The Governor, who had been elected with the support of Carnegie, sent in the Pennsylvania National Guard. The steelworkers resolved to meet the military with open arms, hoping to establish good relations with the troops. But the militia managed to keep its arrival in the town a secret almost to the last moment. On July 12, the Pennsylvania state militia arrived. More than 4,000 soldiers surrounded the plant. Within 20 minutes they had removed the pickets; by 10:00 a.m., company officials were back in their offices. Another 2,000 troops camped on the high ground overlooking the city. The town was under martial law.

Frick easily found replacement workers in cities across the country and built bunkhouses, dining halls, and kitchens on the mill grounds so the non-union workers could stay in the plant while the town remained under martial law. When Frick was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt in his Pittsburgh office, public opinion turned against the steel workers' union. By November, the union had been broken and the mill had reopened as a non-union plant using African American and eastern European workers. Union leaders were blacklisted from the steel industry for life.

One of the strike's consequences was that the steel mills shifted from an eight hour to a 12-hour a day and a six-day workweek. It would be 44 years before the steel industry would again be unionized. However, another consequence was that Carnegie's reputation as a benevolent employer and a champion of labor was stained forever.

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picketeer – protester; often someone who is striking or a supporter of a strike  
martial law – military government involving the suspension of ordinary law  
blacklist – a list of people who will not be hired within a particular industry  
benevolent – well meaning, kindly

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## **NOW WHAT?**

Write a short paragraph addressing each of the following questions:

- Who do you think was right and who was wrong? What details from the reading support your position?
- Do you think this conflict was worth it? Why or why not?
- Based on this reading, what do you think unions needed to have a successful strike?
- Do you think strikes are a reasonable way for workers to get what they want? Why or why not?